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*The Lovejovian Roots of Adler's Philosophy of History:
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I.

On April 15, 1952, the Encyclopædia Britannica Corporation hosted a celebratory banquet in New York City's Waldorf Astoria Hotel announcing the publication of what the *New York Times* dubbed a "literary leviathan," the 54-volume *Great Books of the Western World*. Noteworthy invitees included: Connecticut Senator William Benton; Hollywood film "Code" enforcer Will H. Hays; Simon and Schuster publisher M. Lincoln Schuster; Book-of-the-Month-Club editor Irita Van Doren; and prominent businessmen Alfred Vanderbilt, Marshall Field, Jr., and Nelson A. Rockefeller. Dinner speakers were, in order of appearance, the University of Chicago's Chancellor, Lawrence Kimpton (as master of ceremonies), the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, literary critic Clifton Fadiman, University of Chicago President Robert Hutchins, University of Chicago Professor Mor-

*The author thanks Martin J. Burke and the anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of the History of Ideas* for their comments on this manuscript. Daniel Born of the Great Books Foundation critiqued an early draft, Daniel Wickberg of the University of Texas at Dallas a late draft, and Lewis Erenberg directed the dissertation from which this article derives. Archival assistance was provided by staff at the University of Chicago's Special Collections Research Center, the University of Nebraska's Love Library, and Syracuse University's E.S. Bird Library.

timer J. Adler, and Senator Benton. While several of the aforementioned were friends of Adler and Hutchins, other members of Adler's community of discourse, old and new, attended: Jacques Barzun, Scott Buchanan, William Gorman, Richard McKeon, and Mark Van Doren.¹ Never before—and never again after—would one spot hold so many thoughtful, influential, and sophisticated supporters of the great books idea.

The gala dinner provided a moment for sanguine great books enthusiasts to look forward and backward. Attendees feasted on prime rib and inspected "Founders Editions" of the set's two-volume *Syntopicon* and introductory volume, *The Great Conversation*. Subscribers had earned a place at the table by helping purchase the necessary 500 sets, priced at \$500 each, to get the set published.² In his memoirs Adler recalled the event deliberately: "the excellence of the food and wine," the speakers' "eloquence," and the prominent attendees. For his part, beginning in 1943 he had worked nine years on the project—from conception to the personal hustling of the numbered Founder's Editions to get the *Great Books* in print. The banquet capped the hardest labor, intellectual and otherwise, of the first half of his life.³

All speakers feted the occasion's *cause célèbre*, spending a great deal of time meditating on the meaning of tradition and history in relation to the great books idea. Kimpton opened by noting that Hutchins, Adler, and Benton were "zealous missionaries of the intellectual salvation . . . attained through the study of the Great Books."⁴ Temporary French expatriate, Princeton and Columbia University faculty member, and pre-eminent Thomistic philosopher, Jacques Maritain, followed Kimpton. Maritain's familiarity with the Britannica project derived from Adler, with whom he had formed a connection in the 1940s due to shared philosophical interests. At the dinner, Maritain addressed aspects of the set's "European heritage":

Allow me, as a European, to stress the significance of [the] . . . faithful attention of this country to the European tradition it has

¹ "54-Volume Summary of Western Culture Hailed as History-Making at Dinner Here," *New York Times*, April 16, 1952, 25; University of Chicago Special Collections, Mortimer J. Adler Papers, Box 59, Folder: "Waldorf Dinner" (hereafter UCSC/MJAP, Box number, Folder title); Mortimer Adler, *Philosopher at Large: An Intellectual Autobiography 1902–1976* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 257–58; University of Nebraska-Lincoln, University Archives/Special Collections, Robert E. Dewey Papers, Box 34, Folder: "Great Books Presentation Dinner" transcript (hereafter UNLA/REDP, Box number).

² UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: "GBWW Publicity"; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 257–58.

³ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 255–58.

⁴ UNLA/REDP, Box 34, Folder: "Great Books Presentation Dinner," transcript.

inherited. It seems remarkable to me that the notion of tradition, in its living and genuine sense, is now being rehabilitated, and the task of saving and promoting the best of this very tradition taken over by the pioneering spirit itself of America. This is a sign [that] . . . the historic process . . . [of] intellectual and spiritual struggle on which the destinies of the world depend [have] shift[ed] to this country. Yet this . . . struggle remains universal in nature, and the European mind is involved in it as deeply as the American mind. . . . The Atlantic is now becoming that which the Mediterranean was for thirty centuries, the domestic sea of Western Civilization.⁵

Maritain's pleasure in the set clearly centered on its mooring in Western traditions and history. He next covered the *Syntopicon*, a set of 102 introductory essays on the same number of "Great Ideas" identified as common topics of thought by the collection's authors. Maritain called it "an instrument for, and a harbinger of, the new endeavor of critical examination and creative synthesis through which alone the tradition of the Western world can survive."⁶ The history of ideas captured in the *Syntopicon* would help maintain a critical link to Europe for American intellectual life.

Maritain shared with Adler, and other great books supporters, the belief that cultural progress would occur only when the history of a culture's ideas was studied. This would become a creed for those future, faithful defenders of the viability of the great books: namely, that cultural progress is possible only if great books are the foundation of a society's education system and intellectual community. Maritain capped his address by saying:

At the core of the work undertaken in publishing the *Great Books of the Western World*, there is abiding faith in the dignity of the mind and the virtue of knowledge. Such a work is inspired by what might be called *humanist generosity*. Those who struggle for the liberties of the human mind have first to believe in the dignity of the human mind, and to trust the natural energies of the human mind.⁷

⁵ Ibid. For more on Maritain, see Bernard E. Doering, *Jacques Maritain and the French Catholic Intellectuals* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), and William Sweet, "Jacques Maritain," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy online (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/maritain/>, accessed April 23, 2009).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. For more on Maritain and our common human nature, see his *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), chapter 4 *passim*.

The guests rained applause on Maritain.

Fadiman then addressed the guests in his inimitable, witty style. He joked deprecatingly about how a “dancing bear” like himself did not deserve the company of such “scholars” and “distinguished public servants.” But he too took stock of the history of ideas. Fadiman forwarded that “this brief shelf of books, placed against the mind, makes audible . . . the living voices of 3000 years of my civilization.” The books free the mind “from the thralldom of the current” and break the “trance of the transient.” The *Great Books* were an antidote to “the curse of the contemporary.”⁸ To Fadiman, a sense of one’s intellectual history granted much needed perspective. Both he and Adler believed in the great books’ ability to emancipate readers from the myopia of the present.

Next came Hutchins. He began lightly by thanking the guests, particularly the set’s prime mover and publisher Senator Benton, and Mortimer Adler, constructor of the *Syntopicon* and “vital center of the operation.” In red-herring fashion, Hutchins praised superficialities. He reflected on the *Great Books*’ appearance, calling the set “handsome” and “elaborate.” He noted that “it was put together by the finest designer,” Rudolph Ruzicka—seated merely a few tables away.⁹ Becoming more serious, Hutchins continued, with an evangelical zeal, on the themes of education, freedom, materialism, history, and Western civilization:

Great Books of the Western World is an act of piety. Here are the sources of our being. Here is our heritage. This is the West. This is its meaning for mankind. Here is the faith of the West, for here . . . is that dialogue by way of which Western man has believed that he can approach the truth. The deepest values of the West are implicated in this dialogue. It can be conducted only by free men. It is the essential reason for their freedom.¹⁰

Like the rest of the speakers, Hutchins clearly saw this as more than a mere Britannica business venture. To them the great books evidenced an elusive, immaterial quality—something spiritual.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ UNLA, “Dinner” transcript; UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folders: “Waldorf Dinner” (table roster) and “Data for . . . Project” (Adler’s “Outline of the History the Great Books Project, 1943–1950,” 8); Herman Kogan, *The Great EB: The Story of the Encyclopædia Britannica* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 242.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Hutchins concluded with a celebratory sense of history and an ominous touch of Cold War urgency. At the time, as associate director of the Ford Foundation and its Fund for the Republic, he had been concerned about the chilling effects of McCarthyism on free speech—continuing his 1940s work as a defender of academic freedom at the University of Chicago.¹¹ In concert with Maritain, he noted America’s obligation to its European roots and general Western character:

Great as other civilizations may be and may have been, no civilization can compare with that of the West in the range and variety and depth of the conversation that has characterized and defined the West for more than 2000 years. . . . But arms and money cannot preserve the spirit of Western civilization. That has to be done by a convinced and understanding people. America, while it says that it is defending Western civilization, can actually destroy it by terminating the dialogue. This it can do either by suppressing the free voices that would carry it on or simply by forgetting it. You can burn the books, or you can leave them unread. The result is the same. . . . If America is to do her duty by Western civilization, she cannot be simply a passive, devout receiver or consumer of what the West has created for her. The main point about the dialogue is that it must be carried on.¹²

As with Maritain, applause ensued.

II.

But was this all mere bluster, or purple prose? One scholar implied as much, writing that the promoters’ “rhetoric flowed as freely as the wine.”¹³ But if their intentions and hopes, as outlined above, were even half as honest, high-minded, and sober as they appear, how did the great books idea devolve into the cultural commodity despised by the Left that the Britannica

¹¹ Mary Ann Dzuback, *Robert M. Hutchins: Portrait of an Educator* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 160, 200–202, 226–27, 231, 240, 243, 248; Harry S. Ashmore, *Unseasonable Truths: The Life of Robert Maynard Hutchins* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989), 128–29, 245, 329–30, 374–76.

¹² UNLA, “Dinner” transcript.

¹³ Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 196.

set would become? This is not to say that the great books alone garnered derision from cultural critics. Contemporaries like Dwight Macdonald and Clement Greenberg sneered at middle-class efforts to assimilate high culture. To them, the lesser products they actually consumed were “masscult” or “kitsch,” respectively.¹⁴ Later in the 1950s, even a future Adler ally, Jacques Barzun, would criticize Mortimer Adler’s “intention to provide the liberal arts for all.”¹⁵ Lessons from the history of ideas could not be obtained by easy reading, or by osmosis. Hutchins memorably feared from the outset that the books might become mere “colorful furniture for the front room.”¹⁶ High praise did not imply an ignorance of the risks.

There is no doubt that the great books idea could be abused as a cultural commodity. Using Michael Kammen’s framework, the great books idea devolved from an existence on the planes of high culture (via excellence and its literary content) and popular culture (via Adler and the 1940s clamor for reading groups), to a less distinguished presence on the mass cultural plane.¹⁷ Indeed, the high culture and intellectual roots of the great books idea extend into the late eighteenth century through American figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and in nineteenth-century Europe through Matthew Arnold and other trans-Atlantic Victorian era intellectuals.¹⁸ The great books idea’s transition to mass culture first happened in the United States with an earlier commodity, Charles W. Eliot’s “Five-foot Shelf of Harvard Classics.”¹⁹ Both Eliot’s set and Britan-

¹⁴ Michael Wreszin, *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and Politics of Dwight Macdonald* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 275–77; Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876–1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 416. The following are essays where the ideas of “kitsch” and “masscult” were first broached: Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6 (1939) and Dwight Macdonald, “The Book-of-the-Millennium Club,” *New Yorker* (Nov. 29, 1952), also in *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1962).

¹⁵ Jacques Barzun, *The House of Intellect* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959; Harper Torchbook, 1961), 96n.

¹⁶ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 237.

¹⁷ Michael Kammen, *American Culture American Tastes: Social Change and the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), xii, chapter one passim.

¹⁸ Tim Lacy, “Dreams of a Democratic Culture: Revising the Origins of the Great Books Idea, 1869–1921,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 7 (October 2008): 397–441. Other worthy sources include: Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, chapter one passim; Hugh S. Moorhead, “The Great Books Movement” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1964); and Lewis Perry, *Intellectual Life in America: A History* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984), 263–81.

¹⁹ Tim Lacy, “Making a Democratic Culture: The Great Books Idea, Mortimer J. Adler, and Twentieth-Century America” (Ph.D. diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2006), 45–48; Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 27–30; and Cremin, *American Education*, 385–86.

nica's *Great Books* came to be forms of mass culture, subject to the concerns of business, including sales, marketing, production, profits, standardization, and efficiency. Once a fixed form was assumed, critics could rightly target it as a kind of ossified, commodification of culture.²⁰ The Britannica transition, however, was qualitatively different. Eliot and his editors at P.F. Collier and Son controlled selections for his set, and Eliot's philosophical influences for choosing books are not as clear.²¹ But Mortimer Adler's influences are well known, and his thoughtful, 1940s-era editorial board colleagues at Britannica did not always agree with him.

Because of the power of the great books idea and qualitative differences of the Britannica set from Eliot's endeavor, greater care must be taken in examining the roots of the 1952 publication. As a foundational belief, the community of discourse that comprised the Britannica editorial team imagined that the great books idea, manifest in the *Great Books of the Western World*, could be a kind of complex-but-popular collection of works that would foster an enlightened populace. The key for Adler and his cohort was the creation of a thinking citizenry. As such, they supported several forward-looking, liberal causes: world government; nuclear disarmament; free speech; and racial and economic equality. Ultimately they sought the redistribution of cultural capital for a more democratized culture, not the total reification of an old, inflexible order.²² To understand Adler and his community's intentions, we need to explore the conception, production, and reception of Britannica's *Great Books* project.

Why focus on Mortimer Adler? Hutchins was editor-in-chief of the *Great Books*, but Adler's official—and unofficial—leadership role in the project make him its most important figure. He edited the *Syntopicon* and chaired most of the meetings of the Advisory Board.²³ Adler's concerns, intentions, strengths, and weaknesses permeated the entire process of creating the set. In general, he and his associates sought the commodification of the great books idea not in the hope of achieving a "universal swindle" (selling art as trinkets), or to effect the "abolition of the individual" in favor of the "mass man," but for the practical purpose of instilling intellectual virtues by a thorough exploration of the history of Western ideas.²⁴ They

²⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (1944; New York: Continuum, 1997), 120–67 passim.

²¹ Lacy, "Making," 45–48; Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 28–29.

²² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (New York: Verso, 1991).

²³ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 239.

²⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 154, 157; José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: Norton, 1932).

were academics working loosely under a business framework, rather than businessmen pretending to culture.

Particularly important in the *Great Books*' conception and production was the set's intellectual command center, the *Syntopicon*. A neologism derived from two Greek words signifying "a collection of topics," the *Syntopicon* embodied both the effort to democratize culture and contradictions inherent in that effort.²⁵ The two volumes consisted of 102 carefully chosen "Great Ideas" (topics), each beginning with an "Introduction" and followed by an "Outline of Topics," "References," and "Additional Readings." By identifying the genre of these essays, it becomes clear that a key weakness in Britannica's execution of the great books idea, via the *Great Books*' *Syntopicon* volumes, lies in Adler's somewhat paradoxical philosophy of history. His philosophy at once celebrated Western tradition and shortchanged the nature of history and the history profession. Another weakness, by extension, existed in the tension of constructing the set from either inductive (*a posteriori*) or deductive (*a priori*) criteria. Would the *Great Books* and the ideas the set celebrated, as consistently discussed topics in Western history (i.e. the Great Conversation), arise inductively from a circle of very good and great books themselves? Or would the set and the *Syntopicon*'s discursive nodes deductively result from the particular ideas of a relatively small community of discourse (i.e. Adler and his colleagues) about what constitutes excellence and the liberal arts? Could a balance be achieved?²⁶ Could notions of a democratized culture and cultural greatness coexist? These questions and others vexed Adler and his community of discourse during this period, and informed the building of the *Great Books of the Western World*. Adler looked for answers by reflecting on and extending his own philosophy of history. That philosophy is explored herein.

With the *Syntopicon*, Adler consciously anchored Britannica's *Great Books* in the field we know today as the history of ideas. More particularly, however, and in a less conscious fashion, he also anchored the set in a specific philosophy on the study of ideas in history. Understanding this philosophy is the key to understanding the *Great Books*' place in America's intellectual and cultural history. Adler's philosophy of history explains the difference between Britannica's set and other saleable manifestations of the

²⁵ UCSC, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., Board of Editors Records, Box 1, Folder 1 "Minutes, 1949-1953" ("Report of the 17th Meeting, October 12, 1949," p. 196); Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 238-39.

²⁶ Analysis of the "*a priori*" and "*a posteriori*" issue is in Lacy, "Making," 191-93, 199-203.

great books idea, and helps in understanding later criticisms of the set. Adler came upon both his philosophy and historical methodology while researching his 1943 book, *How to Think About War and Peace*. The method consisted of reading only so-called great books specifically for enlightenment on certain topics (with “the activating push” of a particular question). That kind of research represented only one side of a professional debate on how ideas should be understood historically.²⁷ To clearly comprehend this debate, some of the historiography of intellectual history must be recounted. Adler’s philosophy existed in, and was formed by, unresolved methodological problems in the historical profession.

III.

In more ways than one, the intellectual culture of Columbia University decided the arc of Adler’s philosophy of history. A turn-of-the-century faculty member and historian at Columbia, James Harvey Robinson, indirectly affected Adler’s thinking about the great books. Robinson was a contemporary of Adler’s favorite philosophy professor, Frederick Woodbridge, and Woodbridge was a fellow faculty member of literature professor George Woodberry, historian-sociologist Charles Beard, and philosopher-educator John Dewey. Robinson’s importance lay in what he *represented* to other historians and intellectuals of his era. Together with Beard and others, Robinson formed a scholarly movement now known as the “new history.” Robinson’s relevance to the great books idea, however, was in helping define the new field of intellectual history in terms that might be described today as social and relativistic.²⁸ According to one historian of historians, Peter Novick, Robinson insisted, on the one hand, “that the study of the past was justified by the services it could render to the present.” On the other hand, and due to Robinson’s emphasis on the context of ideas in history, some called his approach “environmentalist.” These contradictory emphases, in their extreme applications, alternately invoked the respective fallac-

²⁷ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 237.

²⁸ Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 213, 257–58; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 89; Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 234; Laurence Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 59.

ies of presentism or historicism—the latter also known as historical relativism.²⁹ With a paradox in hand, this is how Robinson advocated for intellectual history.

In terms of audience, but still in “service . . . to the present,” Robinson also directed his writings toward lay readers, not professional historians. This motivated contemporary and future popularizers of intellectual history. The historian Joan Shelley Rubin links Robinson’s utilitarian, service ideal to the “outline” fad in history, which was manifest in Robinson’s “unmitigated praise” of H.G. Wells’ 1918 bestseller, *The Outline of History*. Rubin also traced Robinson’s influence in middlebrow works such as Will Durant’s endlessly reprinted 1926 outline histories, *The Story of Philosophy* and *The Story of Civilization*.³⁰

One might presume, superficially, that Robinson’s connections to humanizing and popularizing knowledge, as well as developing the field of intellectual history, would have inspired Adler. But in fact, early on, Adler worked against some of Robinson’s ideals. In a youthful, 1926 review of Durant’s outline history, the *Story of Philosophy*, Adler claimed:

Mr. Durant has been so anxious to interlace philosophy with life[,] that he has completely missed the possible contrary perception that philosophy has had an isolated intellectual status, [uninfluenced] in the social and economic nexus, and uninfluenced thereby.³¹

Although only twenty-three years old at the time of this review, Adler exhibited a rudimentary leaning in his philosophy of history: namely, err on the side that ideas can transcend, or translate out of, historical context. To the young Adler, history should serve as the handmaiden of philosophy. History should provide philosophy with examples, with material on which one could extrapolate to ideas.³²

²⁹ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 7, 98, 143, 145n16. For more on historical fallacies, see David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970).

³⁰ Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 213, 237, 257–58; Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 271; Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University*, 59.

³¹ Mortimer J. Adler, review of *The Story of Philosophy*, by Will Durant, *The Nation* (September 29, 1926), 298.

³² This is a paraphrasing of Henry St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, corrected edition (London: T. Cadell, 1770), 14 (courtesy of Loyola University Chicago’s University Archives).

IV.

In the field of intellectual history, the prime opposition to Robinson's theoretical approach came in the 1930s through the historian-philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy at Johns Hopkins University.³³ The great books idea, especially via the term "great ideas" developed by Adler with Britannica around 1943, favored a less environmental, more objectivist approach to history promoted by Lovejoy and his disciples in the field of history. Lovejoy also championed philosophical realism, a perspective reinforcing his view that ideas were not strictly constructed by himself or conditioned by any other idealist, subjectivist, pragmatic inquirers into their past.³⁴ As an enemy of "historical relativism," Lovejoy and a contemporary, Morris Cohen, came to be the defenders of reason and "the existence of objective, in-principle-knowable truth" in the post-World War I era. According to Novick, Lovejoy became one of "the favorite philosophers of objectivist historians from the late thirties onward."³⁵

Lovejoy's most famous work, *The Great Chain of Being* (1936), best illustrates the approach to ideas in history—an approach later adopted by Adler. Lovejoy's work exemplified an "internal" rather than "external" (i.e. Robinson's "environmentalist" or contextual) method of thinking and writing about intellectual history. To Lovejoy, thinkers across generations conversed with each other. He defined the history of ideas, in 1933, as "something at once more specific and less restricted than the history of philosophy." Lovejoy maintained that Western thought contained a number of basic "unit ideas"—strongly resembling Adler and his team's later 102 Great Ideas—deserving of independent historical study. Lovejoy biographer Daniel Wilson reported that the former came across the notion of "unit ideas" in Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy* (1901, 1958).³⁶ To Lovejoy, his disciples, and eventually Adler, Lovejoy explained:

³³ Daniel J. Wilson, *Arthur O. Lovejoy and the Quest for Intelligibility* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 44–46. Lovejoy spent the 1907–8 academic year at Columbia.

³⁴ Wilson, *Arthur O. Lovejoy*, 85; Arthur O. Lovejoy, "Pragmatism Versus the Pragmatist," in *Essays in Critical Realism: A Co-Operative Study of the Problem of Knowledge*, ed. Durant Drake and others (1920; repr., New York: Gordian Press, 1968), 35–84; Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy, Volume 8, Part II* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday/Image Books, 1967), 150–53; Bruce Kucklick, *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 210–11.

³⁵ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 165–66, 260.

³⁶ Wilson, *Arthur O. Lovejoy*, 194–95, 230n16; Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936; repr., 1964), 3.

The number of essentially distinct philosophical ideas or dialectical motives is . . . decidedly limited. . . . The seeming novelty of many a system is due solely to the novelty of the application or arrangement of the old elements that enter into it. When this is realized, the history [of philosophy and ideas] as a whole should look a much more manageable thing.³⁷

This “limited” and “manageable thing” later revealed itself to Adler and his community of discourse as the 102 Great Ideas. It should also be noted that *Great Chain of Being* helped found the field now known as “the history of ideas,” as did the founding of the *Journal of the History of Ideas* in 1940. Morris Cohen, moreover, served on the first editorial board for the journal.

The force of Adler’s engagement with Lovejoy is undeniable—as well as somewhat unexpected in light of Adler’s own repeated claims on the prominent influence of Aquinas and Aristotle on him.³⁸ Nevertheless, Adler’s notions of the history of ideas and methodology for philosophical research would come partially to mimic Lovejoy’s. Adler’s first recorded contact with Lovejoy’s writings occurred through the latter’s 1916 presidential address to the American Philosophical Association. Titled “On Some Conditions of Progress in Philosophical Inquiry,” Lovejoy criticized philosophers for failing “to join issue and engage in well-conducted disputation.”³⁹ Assessing the persistence of Lovejoy in his thought, in 1977 Adler reflected, “At the time, I did not appreciate the influence this single paper would exert on the views I was later to form about how philosophical research should be conducted.”⁴⁰ Even so, other evidence exists of Adler’s esteem for, and intellectual contact with, Lovejoy:

As a student enrolled in General Honors, I also had to enroll in Special Honors in a particular field of scholarship, and I did so in philosophy. . . . The reading I did and reports I wrote ranged over the outstanding figures in contemporary philosophy—Bertrand Russell, George Santayana, F.C.S. Schiller, Henri Bergson, Wil-

³⁷ Lovejoy, *Great Chain*, 4.

³⁸ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 304–5.

³⁹ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 38, 45, 268; Wilson, *Arthur O. Lovejoy*, 88–93; Arthur O. Lovejoy, “On Some Conditions of Progress in Philosophical Inquiry,” *The Philosophical Review* 26 (March 1917): 123–63.

⁴⁰ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 38.

liam James, Arthur O. Lovejoy, John Dewey, R.W. Sellars, . . . and Morris Cohen.⁴¹

Based on Lovejoy's philosophical outlook, as well as the other realists on this list (Santayana, Sellars), Adler's early reading and personal inclinations steeped him in a manner of thinking that denied the philosophical idealism of the nineteenth century. And Adler's distaste for pragmatism and instrumentalism are also well documented.⁴²

Adler put what he learned from Lovejoy, both explicitly and implicitly, into effect during the 1940s and 1950s. The *Syntopicon*, published in 1952, as well as the two *Idea of Freedom* volumes published in 1958 and 1961, became means by which Adler forced philosophers, from different eras, to engage ideas through a particular historical-dialectical methodology. Proof of Lovejoy's influence on Adler came when Adler co-dedicated *Idea of Freedom* to Lovejoy and Paul Mellon. Adler wrote that Lovejoy "opened [his] eyes [first] to the possibility and necessity of the kind of dialectical work which this book tries to exemplify."⁴³ Adler had absorbed both Lovejoy's philosophy of history and views on the history of philosophy.

In a much later work of Adler's, *The Four Dimensions of Philosophy* (1993), he indirectly acknowledged his deeper connection to Lovejoy than the mere impetus toward collaboration. In *Four Dimensions* Adler reflected on his 1952 self as follows: "I did not then realize that these [102 *Syntopicon*] essays were a kind of dialectical summation of Western thought on basic philosophical controversies that had been poorly carried on because the philosophers so seldom joined issue and argued relevantly against one another."⁴⁴ In connection to Lovejoy's philosophy of history, one could paraphrase: . . . *because the historians so seldom joined philosophers' issues across time to argue relevantly against one another*. Using Lovejoy, Adler did what intellectual historians and philosophers either could not, or would not, do: namely, foster dialogue.

Adler's philosophy of history clearly incorporated aspects of philosophical realism. While this realism had early connections to Lovejoy, Adler

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 27–29, 169–71; Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America*, 207–10, chapter ten passim. See also Bennie R. Crockett, Jr., "Mortimer J. Adler: An Analysis and Critique of His Eclectic Epistemology" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wales-Lampeter, 2000).

⁴³ Mortimer J. Adler, *The Idea of Freedom: A Dialectical Examination of the Conceptions of Freedom* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1958), 1: v, xv.

⁴⁴ Mortimer J. Adler, *The Four Dimensions of Philosophy: Metaphysical, Moral, Objective, Categorical* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1993), xxiii.

traced his own 1940s “common sense realism” to his “dear friend” Jacques Maritain. Maritain became connected to Adler’s view of philosophy’s usefulness, or utility, and philosophy’s relationship to history. Adler cited Maritain’s *An Introduction to Philosophy*, as well as Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle, as influential in developing his philosophical outlook.⁴⁵ Maritain adhered to a neo-Thomist philosophy congenial to realism, and in the late 1930s he became an important part of Adler’s extended community of discourse.⁴⁶ More proof of neo-Thomism’s congeniality to realism and history is shown by the fact that another French neo-Thomist sympathizer, Etienne Gilson, attached himself to a form of realism. Gilson revealed his views in a series of articles first published from 1931 to 1935, and compiled as a book entitled *Methodical Realism*. Stanley L. Jaki, in his introduction to that work, reported that yet another temporary French expatriate and neo-Thomist, the philosopher Yves Simon, encouraged Gilson to publish those essays.⁴⁷ Gilson’s specialization was the history of philosophy, particularly of the medieval period, but Adler never cited Gilson’s work with the same enthusiasm as he did Maritain. Nevertheless, it is clear that most 1930s and 1940s neo-Thomists found some form of realism compatible with their beliefs. And Adler, via Maritain, need not surrender his youthful penchant for Lovejoyan realism even as Adler became a Thomist.

According to Adler, Maritain’s “vivid and controlling insight” was that philosophy could produce “certifiable and testable knowledge,” on par with the empirical sciences, “of the world in which we live, of the nature of things, [and] of man and of society.” Adler also asserted that Maritain gave

⁴⁵ Adler, *Four Dimensions*, xxiv–xxv; Adler, *Second Look*, 21, 237, 242–43, 268; Crockett, “Mortimer J. Adler,” 11, 51, n153, 56–62.

⁴⁶ Crockett, “Mortimer J. Adler,” 77–83, 128–37; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 40, 186–97, 192, 200; Michael D. Torre, “Introduction,” in *Freedom in the Modern World: Jacques Maritain, Yves R. Simon, Mortimer J. Adler*, ed. Michael D. Torre (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press/American Maritain Society, 1989), 1; John Haldane, “Maritain, Jacques,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 522. For more on Maritain, see also: Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy: Modern Philosophy: From the French Revolution to Sartre, Camus, and Levi-Strauss* (New York: Doubleday’s Image Books, 1974), 250–70 passim; Bernard Doering, *Jacques Maritain and the French Catholic Intellectuals* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); and James V. Schall, *Jacques Maritain: The Philosopher in Society* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

⁴⁷ Etienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, trans. Philip Trower, intro. Stanley L. Jaki (Front Royal, Va.: Christendom Press, 1990), introduction passim; Ralph McInerny, “Etienne Gilson” (2005, http://ethicscenter.nd.edu/inspires/documents/-Etienne_Gilson.pdf, accessed April 24, 2009); “Yves R. Simon,” Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture (no author, no date, <http://ethicscenter.nd.edu/inspires/simon.shtml>, accessed April 24, 2009).

philosophy “dignity and made it respectable as an undertaking to which one [could] devote one’s . . . life.”⁴⁸ With regard to their ancient and medieval predecessors, Maritain wrote of Aristotle: “That great *realist* advanced nothing *a priori* and always studied the *historical development of a problem* before he proposed his own solution.” Adler later emphasized this point in his 1978 book, *Aristotle for Everybody*.⁴⁹ As with Maritain, Aquinas, and Aristotle, Adler stressed that *understanding the history of thought* on a topic was of utmost importance. And those topics, or ideas, possessed a history independent of subjective perception, were discoverable by all due to “common human experience.”⁵⁰

V.

Adler’s independent understanding of history, and variations in the philosophy of history, began well before he developed connections to Maritain and Thomism. In a 1932 lecture Adler argued, in defining what history is, that it “must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, the determination of which is partly conventional and partly rational.”⁵¹ He also reflected that “history is a poem constructed out of propositions.”⁵² But Adler was less clear in precisely defining his philosophy of history in that lecture. On two later occasions, in 1941 and 1950, he groped towards a philosophy. In a 1941 address at the University of Chicago before J. Robert Oppenheimer and others, Adler paraphrased the Irish Thomist, Father Vincent (Joseph) McNabb, O.P. (1868–1943), to argue that “in the history of philosophy you have history at its best, but in the philosophy of history you have philosophy at its worst.” Adler flatly stated he did not see the philosophy of history, as a subject, as “respectable itself.” By 1950 his opinion improved somewhat, in that the philosophy of history then seemed to be the “most conjectural, most like opinion.” In both articles, however, he relayed that the primary importance of a sound philosophy of history lay in its convey-

⁴⁸ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 298; Adler, *Four Dimensions*, xxiv–xxv.

⁴⁹ Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. E. I. Watkin (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1937), 18 (italics mine); Mortimer J. Adler, *Aristotle for Everybody* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 30.

⁵⁰ Crockett, “Mortimer J. Adler,” 56–62.

⁵¹ UCSC/MJAP, Box 41, Folder: “The Nature of History,” 5, The lecture was given February 12, 1932.

⁵² “The Nature of History,” 8.

ance of a sense of “optimism” about the future.⁵³ To Adler, it seems, looking at the past in too much detail only perpetuated pessimism about humanity and its prospects.

Despite his skepticism on the subject, Adler nonetheless articulated a rudimentary philosophy of history—perhaps unconsciously—in his 1932 lecture. He reasoned: “Historiography requires an aggregation of historical propositions into phase groups according to a physiognomic, [or] a developmental scheme. [This] physiognomic is not stated in the history, although the historical ordering of the historical propositions expresses it.”⁵⁴ It should be noted that Adler’s understanding of the meaning of the term “physiognomic” was based on a misunderstanding of its Greek roots. Adler thought the roots were *physis* and *nomos*, which caused him mistakenly to use the term in relation to history. The real meaning of “physiognomy” deals with “the practice of trying to judge character and mental qualities by observation of bodily, esp. facial, features.”⁵⁵ Adler’s error was pointed out, and acknowledged by Adler, shortly after the lecture by Paul Shorey of University’s Greek Department.⁵⁶ More importantly, what Adler did not acknowledge at the time was that his “physiognomic” statement was a philosophy at work in the subject of history.

His thoughts on the philosophy of history continued to develop. Adler wrote in 1944 that when history acts philosophical, it “tries to find a pattern in the events, and a reason for the pattern; it searches for general trends beneath particular facts.”⁵⁷ But even at that point he had never retracted the sharp, stubborn line he drew, in 1932, between the historian’s search for a “physiognomic” and the historian’s construction of a philosophical system. Because of his opposition both to Marxism and science’s claims to supremacy, he had stated the following in 1932: “The failure to recognize [that history is a form and not a subject matter] . . . has resulted in such misconceptions as ‘scientific history’ and . . . various ‘philosophies of history’ which have subordinated a history to a science, and substituted system

⁵³ UCSC/MJAP, Box 73, Folder: “An Optimistic View of History,” transcript of address given on May 25, 1941, at the University of Chicago’s International House, 2–3; Angela Cunningham, “McNabb, Joseph (1868–1943),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 (<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/48427>, accessed Aug 21, 2008).

⁵⁴ UCSC/MJAP, Box 41, Folder: “The Nature of History,” 5.

⁵⁵ *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 1991.

⁵⁶ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 160

⁵⁷ Mortimer Adler, *How to Think About War and Peace*, intro. John J. Logue, “A Plea to the Reader” by Clifton Fadiman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944; repr. New York: Fordham University Press, 1995), 168.

for physiognomy.”⁵⁸ Adler’s opposition to a particular ideology, and distaste for positivism in the social sciences (a position made abundantly clear in his 1937 book, *What Man Has Made of Man*), blinded him to the need for one to own a philosophy of history.⁵⁹ He either ignored or did not recognize the fact that when historians order and arrange events, a set of philosophical choices—consciously acknowledged or not—directs that activity.

Adler’s statements demonstrate that by the time he became the editor of Britannica’s *Syntopicon*, he had minimized the historians’ share in philosophy—an enterprise he himself acknowledged as being “everybody’s business.”⁶⁰ He had reduced the historian’s role as a philosopher in the finding of patterns and inductively constructing generalizations. Adler’s arrested [or truncated?] philosophical development both explains and foreshadows his failure, when he acted as a historian of ideas in the construction of that same *Syntopicon*, to acknowledge that his own dialectical vision of ideas constituted a philosophical system—a philosophy of history.⁶¹ As a philosopher, he became engaged in a Herculean historical task without, ironically, a well-explicated, well-engaged philosophy of history behind what he was doing. He must have sensed this along the way, for he would indeed articulate his philosophy toward the end of the project.

By 1952, Adler could articulate a philosophy of history despite his lack of engagement with, and respect for, contemporary professional historians. He conveyed the basics of his thinking in a February 1952 letter to *Time* magazine editor Henry Grunwald. To Adler, when historians studied ideas in history, they should look “for the plot behind the story of mankind” and hold that “man’s capacities remain a constant factor throughout.” They ought, he wrote to Grunwald, to fight against “scholarship that blur[s] the picture or overload[s] it with . . . detail.”⁶² Adler’s system of thinking about history consisted of a benign minimization of historical context and forceful belief in common sense realism, or objective reality.

⁵⁸ UCSC/MJAP, Box 41, Folder: “The Nature of History,” 8.

⁵⁹ Mortimer J. Adler, *What Man Has Made Of Man: A Study of the Consequences of Platonism and Positivism in Psychology* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1937).

⁶⁰ Mortimer J. Adler, “The Philosopher,” in *The Works of the Mind*, ed. Robert B. Heywood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 229; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 313.

⁶¹ Mortimer J. Adler, “The Principles and Methods of Syntopical Construction,” in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert M. Hutchins, vol. 3, *The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World*, eds. Mortimer J. Adler and William Gorman, vol. II (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952), 1259–62.

⁶² UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: “Time Cover Story” (Adler to Grunwald, February 29, 1952, p. 2); Adler, *How to Think About War and Peace*, 168.

The term “benign” applies because in a number of places Adler admitted that context can be important. This concession by him has often been forgotten, ignored, or caricatured by subsequent critics of the great books idea and historians. In turn, Adler’s frequent neglect in meeting critics and historians *on their terms* prevented a kind of professional “agreement to disagree.” Both problems resulted in little substantive debate about the importance of Adler’s Lovejoyan-inspired dialectical work and the role of philosophy in historical method, particularly as it pertained to the *Syntopicon*. The overall irony, in relation to Adler’s respect for Maritain and Thomism, was Adler’s hypocritical lack of an Aristotelian engagement with *the history* of the idea of history, or historiography, in building his rudimentary philosophy of history.

One constant for Adler, consistent with his philosophy of realism and Lovejoyan influence, was his belief that all humans—past, present, and future—possessed an apprehensible common nature. In a 1941 lecture he claimed:

All of us owe it to ourselves to . . . contemplate the facts of history and speculate on them, even though none of us can achieve much certain truth about them. . . . The very goodness, the very benefit of history is to emancipate oneself from time and from history itself. . . . The better understanding we have of history, the more we are emancipated from its localities and its blindnesses [sic]. Through the philosophy of history, if we can achieve it, we get a very weak participation in eternity.⁶³

This somewhat contradictory expression correlated with what he would term, in 1958, as the “non-historical” study of an idea’s history. Adler understood the importance of context, but nevertheless minimized it in his own philosophy of history. One could call this “Adler’s paradox.”

This paradoxical philosophy found support at the University of Chicago in the 1930s and into the 1940s. Adler’s position—both philosophically and as President Robert Maynard Hutchins’ principal advisor—emboldened champions of the New Criticism there. The school of New Critics, then recently ascendant within the literature department, eschewed “scholarship,” pedantry, and “research scholars,” especially those who advocated the study of historical circumstance, stressing instead the close

⁶³ Adler, “Optimistic,” 61.

reading of texts.⁶⁴ After Adler gave his lecture on the idea of “physiognomic” in 1932, a prominent advocate for New Criticism, Ronald Crane of the English Department, wrote that he was in “entire agreement” with Adler’s lecture.⁶⁵

To Crane, Adler’s position underlined the idea that one need not give extensive consideration to past circumstance—historical context—when considering a text’s meaning. The idea of a “physiognomic” supported Crane’s focus on aesthetic, political, and ethical considerations.⁶⁶ Literary historian and scholar Gerald Graff neatly summed up the position of Crane and his like-minded colleagues, the “Crane Group,” in the development of textual criticism: “New Criticism put the old historicism out of its misery.”⁶⁷ And Adler aided them, and vice versa, in soldiering against history enthusiasts and professionals.

VI.

By 1952, Adler anticipated the history profession’s potential problems with his historical “Introductions” for each of the *Syntopicon*’s 102 “Great Ideas.” Indeed, his writing of the “History” essay likely sensitized him to the many historiographical issues. With that, Adler published a preemptory defense in the 1952 *Syntopicon*’s appendix, entitled “The Principles and Methods of Syntopical Construction.” This Appendix II addressed, among other topics, the various “aims” of each Introduction. Adler’s “dialectical” aim in each was “to report some of the . . . basic intellectual oppositions” within each great idea. He acknowledged the potential for “partiality” in outlining these opposing views, but asserted that biases could be overcome by a “firm intention to avoid” the problem.⁶⁸

Per his benign minimization philosophy, Adler claimed in the “Principles” essay that a balance was sought between too much and too little context in the *Syntopicon*’s Introductions. In acknowledging the problems of too little context, Adler stated: “Sometimes the political, economic, and cultural conditions of a time are more than the background of thinking or environment to which the thought refers; they are the conditions of thought

⁶⁴ Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 145, 128.

⁶⁵ Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 160.

⁶⁶ Graff, 147.

⁶⁷ Graff, 11; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 160.

⁶⁸ Adler, “Principles,” 1254–65. See note 60 for the full citation.

itself, and therefore of its intelligibility.” But Adler also pointed out that history scholars who believe in the “extreme form” of historicism—that great books authors “managed to create an intellectual world entirely his [or her] own . . . and rendered incommunicable with other worlds”—really do not believe in the idea of any form of chronological or linguistic translation.⁶⁹ For extreme historicists, no *degrees* of historicism exist; it is the past, the present, or nothing. In theory this echoed Adler’s historian mentor, Lovejoy, in its moderate course. In practice in the *Syntopicon*’s essays, Adler provided less context than Lovejoy would have.⁷⁰

In light of these extremes, it is tempting to see Adler’s position as perhaps slightly off a moderate center in the historicist/antiquarian-versus-presentist debate. But he would take a step backward after the 1952 essay by again stating something contradictory. In his 1958 book, *Idea of Freedom*, which was a more intense, more textually inclusive “dialectic” version of Britannica’s *Syntopicon* (meaning that Adler and his team of researchers used non-“great books”), Adler introduced the phrase “a non-historical” study of ideas.⁷¹ At that point he eschewed his reasonable, even subtle, 1952 point of view on a “non-historical” *history* of ideas. Adler was determined to squeeze a notion he called “dialectic” in whatever free intellectual space existed between professional history—even the liberal history of ideas—and professional philosophy.

VII.

Perhaps Adler’s philosophical argument for the minimization of context was merely a practical business decision made easy by the quantitatively large amount of text in the set? If this were the case, one could argue that Adler and his colleagues “sold out”—that they sacrificed what they knew to be intellectually necessary, or honest, to make money in the middlebrow culture market. This is unlikely, however, or merely a correlation, since Adler had long held the position—inherited from Columbia University’s John Erskine—that primary texts, or the “great books,” ought to be the

⁶⁹ Adler, “Principles,” 1256, 1291, 1293.

⁷⁰ Lovejoy, *Great Chain of Being*, 15, 19.

⁷¹ Adler, *Idea of Freedom*, xviii; Ralph McNerny, “Adler on Freedom,” in *Freedom in the Modern World: Jacques Maritain, Yves R. Simon, Mortimer J. Adler*, ed. Michael D. Torre (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press/American Maritain Society, 1989), 67; Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies*, 135–42.

fodder for gaining a liberal education.⁷² The fact that Erskine's reading program devalued "environmentalism" coincided with Lovejoy's belief in really existing, independent "unit ideas" that transcended environment. These historical movements came together in Adler, thereby legitimizing (at least somewhat) his inadequate philosophy of history and self-satisfied dismissal of the concerns of some professional historians. It was almost natural of Adler to be against history in its most contextual form—the kind that concerns experts in the field. It stands to reason that when the great books idea, as represented by Adler and his cohort, was criticized in the 1980s and 1990s, that historians such as Lawrence Levine found it easy to be a part of the opposition.⁷³

Adler's own shifting thought on the philosophy of history brings an essential problem of the great books into view. The substance of the argument between great books enthusiasts and critics lies in the problem of the *degree of context* needed to understand a great book or a great idea. Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World* does supply *some* degree of context, through authors' biographies (situated just before each author's work/s) and the overlapping time frames of some works. The books are also ordered chronologically and discussed in the *Syntopicon's* integrative, history-of-ideas-like topical essays in a rough chronological order. But when does the lack of year-by-year, or decade-by-decade, context subtract substantially from the meaning of a historical text? On the other hand, how much context is too much, such that antiquarianism enters and detracts from a composition's relevance, or even keeps the work itself out of view? And how much context is actually available? These are problems with which historians must always deal, but which Adler avoided. The most important thing for him was to democratize the great books idea, and that meant maximizing accessibility to the great books for readers of varying intellectual backgrounds. In introducing the masses to the notion of thinking philosophically, the most expedient solution for Adler and his community of discourse was to lessen context.

This debate has dogged the Great Books movement for decades. In his 1964 dissertation tracing the history of the Great Books Foundation, Hugh S. Moorhead noted that Adler's intellectual circle—consisting of Scott Buchanan (a philosopher and co-founder of St. John's college), the Columbia

⁷² Adler, 30–31, 55–56; Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 186–96; Graff, 134–35, 163–64.

⁷³ Lawrence Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 50–53.

poet Mark Van Doren, educator Stringfellow Barr (the other St. John's co-founder), and the Columbia literature professor John Erskine—all subscribed to the notion that “background,” or “historical times, biographical data, and influences surrounding [a] particular writing,” could basically be ignored when examining a great book. Moorhead added that “no other ‘rule of the game’ . . . caused so much concern to both participants and critics” of the Great Books Foundation and Adler’s group.⁷⁴ No matter what book is being considered, whether well established or newly minted as a “great book,” the persistent issues of context remain.

With regard to Adler, then, the *Syntopicon* acted as a locus for the philosophical problems swirling around the great books idea. Depending on one’s own philosophy of history and beliefs about human nature, the *Syntopicon* either embodied Adler’s paradox and the fallacy of presentism, or else stood as a tall marker against the fallacy of historicism. Ultimately, the maxim of the eighteenth-century author Henry St. John, the Lord Viscount Bolingbroke, best approximates Adler’s professional commitment: “History is philosophy teaching by examples.”⁷⁵ Adler’s cohort followed him in making his philosophy of history a reality in the *Syntopicon* and the *Great Books of the Western World*. And the *Syntopicon* still stands as a monument to Adler’s philosophy of history, moreover, because he never substantially clarified that philosophy further in his later writings.

VIII.

Reading the text of the glamorous Waldorf dinner against Adler’s own prose proves enlightening. Adler’s and Benton’s speeches concluded the Waldorf dinner, with Adler’s running the longest, and both captured conflicting tensions embodied by the Britannica set. Adler arose to applause, and expressed his gratitude to Hutchins, Benton, and the Founders. Adler acknowledged first that a community of workers, “of whom only a handful” were there that night, “labored almost day and night” for years in producing the *Great Books* and *Syntopicon*. The *Syntopicon*’s production, especially, required that “many minds work[ed] together for many years . . . in the sphere of ideas.”⁷⁶ He elaborated:

⁷⁴ Hugh S. Moorhead, “The Great Books Movement” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1964), 572.

⁷⁵ Moorhead, “The Great Books Movement,” 573–76, 579; Bolingbroke, 14.

⁷⁶ UNLA/REDP, Box 34, Folder: “Great Books Presentation Dinner,” transcript.

We are accustomed to such collaboration in the laboratory or in other phases of experimental research. But we tend to think of philosophical inquiry or humanistic study as an individual creative effort. Atom bombs can be made in that way, but not books, certainly not books that deal with ideas. . . . If there are tremendous advantages to collaboration in science, why should we not try to secure these advantages for philosophical and humanistic studies?⁷⁷

This very deliberate reference to the cooperative work of thinkers (mistakenly opposed to the immense collaboration required by the Manhattan Project) underscored Adler's later work, that same year, at his Institute for Philosophical Research. Indeed, during the spring of 1952, he had worked diligently on gathering financial support for the Institute.

The Institute consumed the next ten years of Adler's life. It helped fulfill his vision of Lovejoy's aforementioned 1916 call for philosophical cooperation. Having tasted the fruits of dialectical inquiry with the *Syntopicon*, Adler foresaw the expanded harvest the Institute might reap. He reported at the Waldorf that some *Syntopicon* workers would use it as a template for "a more difficult and exacting collaborative effort—a dialectical summation of Western thought, a synthesis for the 20th century."⁷⁸ The Institute would explore Western history, in the great books and beyond, to make present the answered and unanswered questions of philosophy. The Institute would both fulfill Lovejoy's vision of philosophical progress and utilize his methodological approach to the history of ideas.

After outlining this material plan, Adler turned his address toward his philosophy of history and the *Syntopicon's* historical nature. He argued that the *Syntopicon* "demonstrates concretely and vividly the reality of the great conversation" (Adler's underscoring). He professed that he could not say whether Hutchins or Buchanan came up with the great conversation trope, but noted that "we all have been using [it] to signify the dramatic character of the intellectual tradition of the West." Here Adler explicitly confessed to a "physiognomic," a scheme, inherent in his version of the history of Western ideas. Next he pointed out the veracity and existence of historical facts present in the *Syntopicon*. Its demonstration of the historical "reality of the great conversation" was true because it "simply and plainly . . . record[ed] the great conversation in all its concrete details." Further-

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

more, in all “of the 3,000 topics, the references to the great books” were arranged “in their chronological order.”⁷⁹ While the term “history” was relatively absent in Adler’s address, the *Syntopicon* clearly met his own criteria for that kind of work. Adler had talked about history without having to formally engage the history profession.

Without having to acknowledge the storytelling aspect of history, Adler was not compelled to confess that the *Syntopicon* and the *Great Books* set included some degree of human subjectivity, namely his own. In fact, at the gala he claimed the opposite:

The *Syntopicon* may help to liberate its users from partial or partisan views of the western tradition. Most of us tend to be, in one way or another, particularistic rather than universal in our allegiance to and understanding of our intellectual tradition. We have sectarian or parochial or epochal limitations of vision or interest. We see the part as the whole or regardless of the whole. . . . The *Syntopicon* may help cure such intellectual blindness.⁸⁰

The strengths and weaknesses of works of history (i.e. subjectivity, choice, style) were left unspoken. No matter the years of hard work and degrees of truth present in the *Syntopicon*’s dialectical vision of ideas, this failure to concede historical choices and assumptions would eventually mar the *Great Books*’ future.

The group that produced the set proceeded without qualification, without having to admit that the *Great Books* contained subjective factors of selection and emphasis. Perhaps they feared the public would not accept their recommended reading as authoritative if they qualified themselves? A salesman might concede this would be too hard to explain during a transaction, but the intellectuals behind the books need not shirk from addressing complications. If this fear was ever consciously present, but ignored, among the set’s intellectual producers, it nevertheless resulted in a charade of authority that, once discovered, would destroy the long term health of the great books idea. It would take years, however, for this little error in the beginning to become apparent. The democratic intentions of the producers masked the *Great Books*’ weaknesses. This is the great irony in the history of the great books idea—the mixing of a falsely objective authoritativeness

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

with democratic intentions in intellectual production of Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World*.

A few years after the Waldorf gala, Adler's philosophy of the history of ideas would gain praise from those who inspired him the most. When the Institute for Philosophical Research produced volume one of the *Idea of Freedom* in 1958, advance copies were sent to those to whom the work was dedicated, Arthur O. Lovejoy and Paul Mellon, and others. Letters of praise returned from colleagues such as the neo-Thomists Jacques Maritain and Yves R. Simon.⁸¹ But one letter likely proved especially satisfying. A 95-year-old, still lucid Lovejoy wrote:

The long-awaited *opus magnum* . . . came into my hands almost a fortnight ago, and I must not longer delay to congratulate you and your associates of the Institute . . . on the completion of so protracted and arduous an inquiry, and to express to yourself my high appreciation. . . . Thanks to your initiative and energy . . . the dream—[and] it was scarcely more than that—of organized, methodical, comprehensive and (so far as is humanly possible) open-minded investigation of a philosophical problem in light of its history—this dream has now been tried out in actual practice—and on a grander scale than I had even dreamed of. . . . I could wish it to be made required reading for all philosophers, whatever their special subjects.⁸²

So even if Adler's work did not precisely mimic Lovejoy's history of ideas project, Adler approximated a Lovejovian vision of history that had satisfied the project's founder. As such, there can be little doubt that Lovejoy's approval mattered a great deal. Indeed, Adler's Lovejovian roots had fully inspired the 1958 project.

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⁸¹ Syracuse University Library/Special Collections Research Center/Mortimer J. Adler Papers (NXSV322-A), Series I, Box 1, Folder: "Corres re-Idea of Freedom by Adler 1958–Aug–September," Simon to Adler (September 7, 1958) and Maritain to Adler (September 7, 1958).

⁸² *Ibid.*, Lovejoy to Adler (no date, est. Aug–Oct 1958).